

James Buchanan

OF THE MEN who have served as President of the United States, only one has been a native of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. James Buchanan, of Lancaster, elected in 1856 and president for one term, held the office at one of the most critical stages in our nation's history.

President Buchanan had spent forty-two years in public life as State assemblyman, United States representative, minister to Russia, United States senator, secretary of state, and minister to England. His record of political attainment was little help, however, in solving the national dilemma of the 1850's, the slavery issue.

The debate about slavery, entwined as it was with the difficult issues of territorial expansion, internal improvements, and the financial condition of the country, colored every problem with which Buchanan dealt as president. Changing conditions of life during the 1850's—the growth of urban population, the increase in immigration, the demand for speculative money, and the rise of the Republican party—created too many areas of conflict and too many groups unwilling or unable to compromise. Buchanan has been severely criticized for his failure to reconcile conflicting ideologies and interests. Solutions which he did attempt, only to be thwarted, have too often been dismissed by his critics. He did manage to avert open warfare, and when he handed the presidency to Abraham Lincoln on March 4, 1861, the office was still unscarred by fraternal bloodshed.

James Buchanan was born on April 23, 1791,

at Stony Batter, in Cove Gap, Franklin County. This was an important stopping point on the Philadelphia-to-Pittsburgh road, and his father, James, who came from Ireland in 1783, had established a trading post there. In 1788 he married a Lancaster County girl, Elizabeth Speer. Their son James was the first of their eleven children to survive infancy; for his first fourteen years, he was their only son.



Courtesy National Archives

James Buchanan

Photograph by Matthew Brady, 1858.

In 1796 the Buchanan family moved to Mercersburg, where young James studied Greek and Latin at the Old Stone Academy. He also assisted in his father's store and developed the meticulous personal bookkeeping which characterized his entire life. In 1807 he entered Dickinson College, Carlisle, which then had forty-two students. Buchanan performed well academically and participated in numerous extra-curricular activities. His skylarking, however, and his arrogant demeanor landed him in trouble and he was dismissed. But he returned.

After graduation in 1809, Buchanan studied law in Lancaster, then the State capital, and was admitted to the bar in 1812. He

practiced law and plunged into local politics. He had been raised on his father's strongly Federalist views, and he echoed them. The Lancaster Federalists nominated him for State assemblyman on August 24, 1814, the same day the British were burning the White House and capital during their occupation of Washington. Buchanan and several friends volunteered for duty, and were sent to recruit horses for use at Baltimore. With that he returned home, his military career completed.

The Lancaster district leaned heavily to the Federalists, so Buchanan's election as State assemblyman—to serve at the new capital of Harrisburg—was no surprise. At the end of his second term in 1816, however, he returned to Lancaster, since the policy of the party was to share political offices among its candidates.

In 1819 he became engaged to Ann Coleman, the daughter of a wealthy ironmaster and owner of several furnaces, among them Cornwall and Hopewell. Circumstances led her finally to terminate the engagement. While visiting Philadelphia to recover from the blow, she suddenly took ill and died. The tragedy was heightened by the Colemans' refusal to allow her afflicted suitor to attend the funeral. Although many women were to come for brief periods into Buchanan's life, never again would he come this close to marriage.

In 1820 Buchanan received the Federalist nomination for United States representative from Dauphin, Lebanon, and Lancaster counties, and was easily elected. When he arrived in Washington in 1821, it was still a raw country town; the streets were muddy and full of potholes, accommodations were poor, and reminders of the War of 1812 remained. Yet, it was the center of national politics, and Buchanan took an active part. Painstakingly he built his personal power. In 1824 and 1826 Buchanan was elected to Congress as a Federalist, although now on an "amalgamated" platform which pitched its appeal also to his traditional enemies. The Federalist party had disintegrated, and no longer entered the statewide elections in Pennsylvania. Buchanan's principles combined Democratic and Federalist ideas, and it was easy for him to drift gradually into the Democratic fold. That the powers of the three branches of government, as well as the state and federal governments, must be clearly distinguished and respected was the cornerstone of his political philosophy.

In 1828 he was returned to Congress, this time as a Democrat. In this, his last term as a congressman, he made a notable contribution by defending the ultimate jurisdiction of the U. S. Supreme Court over all cases involving the federal constitution, federal law, and treaties with foreign powers, in opposition to those who wished to deny this power. His was the view that prevailed.

With the approach of the presidential campaign of 1832, Buchanan was rumored as a possible vice-presidential candidate to run with Andrew Jackson on the Democratic ticket. Before rumor could become reality, however, Buchanan was appointed minister to Russia, where he served from 1832 to 1833.

Returning home in November, 1833, he began preparations for a special senatorial election. He lost, but under similar circumstances in 1834 he was elected. (In those days a U. S. senator was elected by the state legislature.) In this re-exposure to Pennsylvania politics, Buchanan, the canny politician, was grateful for his year's absence, for it had been a time of tension between national and Pennsylvania Democrats. He had avoided involvement and was now in a strong position. Buchanan was again elected in the regular senatorial elections of 1836. During this period his family claimed much of his attention, as he found himself responsible for nieces and nephews, invalids and widowed family members. Throughout his life he was to be more than generous in providing medical and educational aid to his family.

In 1842 Buchanan was again elected to the Senate, and in 1844, a presidential election year, his name was mentioned for the Democratic nomination. James Polk won the nomination, was elected, and selected Buchanan as his secretary of state. It was a time of territorial expansion. Buchanan was instrumental in settling the northern boundary of the Oregon territory, which, although a compromise, avoided war with Britain and proved satisfactory to most critics. A boundary dispute with Mexico, however, brought on the Mexican War from 1845 to 1848, when, as a settlement, Mexico ceded large southwestern territories to the United States.

With the end of Polk's administration drawing near, Buchanan again eyed the presidential nomination. Lewis Cass of Michigan received the nomination, however, and was defeated by General Zachary Taylor, the Whig candidate.

With the opposition in power, Buchanan retired temporarily from public life. With an increasing number of his family needing his attention, and additional leisure available to him, he purchased Wheatland, a lovely estate west of Lancaster. The life of a country gentleman—gardening, repair of the homestead, and



Courtesy Wheatiana

Wheatland, Buchanan's Lancaster home, open March 15 to November 30.

the relaxation of having his family around him—was most pleasing. He became the “Sage of Wheatland.” The visits of political friends were unending, and the discussions centering around the Compromise of 1850 profoundly interested Buchanan. He felt that the popular sovereignty clauses of the compromise, allowing settlers in each territory to determine if slavery should exist there, were certain to produce turmoil and violence. He believed that the power to limit slavery in the territories should have been left to Congress. In delineating his views, and in stressing the need for peaceful settlement of the slavery issue, Buchanan was working to gain the Democratic presidential nomination of 1852. It went to Franklin Pierce, however, and Pierce was elected.

Pierce appointed Buchanan his minister to England. This kept Buchanan from becoming embroiled in the most serious political issue of the day, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which dealt, again, with the expansion of slavery into the territories.

Upon his return in 1856, Buchanan found solid support in the Democratic party, and received the nomination for president at the 1856 convention. The appearance of the strictly sectional Republican party, and its first candidate, John C. Frémont, made Buchanan's campaign statement, “The Union is in danger and the people everywhere begin to know it,” extremely

appropriate. As was the custom in political campaigns of the time, Buchanan made no tours, but remained at Wheatland and carried on a voluminous correspondence. His appeal was based on his well known conservative and unionist viewpoint and the confidence of Southerners that he was not hostile to their situation. Running against Frémont and former President Millard Fillmore, he got only forty-five percent of the popular vote, but won fifty-nine percent of the vote by the electoral college. The Democratic platform had advocated a modified form of local sovereignty in deciding the slavery issue in each of the territories. Buchanan had always feared the violence to which such a solution could lead. Such was the result in “Bloody Kansas,” which haunted Buchanan through most of his term. The settlers there were in the process of writing a constitution under which they could be admitted as a state. The crucial issue, of course, was whether slavery should be permitted. The slavery opponents boycotted the convention called at Lecompton. Buchanan's support of this unpopular constitution, which permitted slavery, brought the wrath of anti-slavery forces upon him. Although personally opposed to slavery, Buchanan used every political weapon in his attempt to push the constitution through Congress. Eventually a compromise plan succeeded in Congress, only to be overwhelmingly rejected by the anti-slavery Kansans.

The Kansas issue greatly strengthened the Republicans in the congressional elections of 1858 and 1859, further weakening Buchanan's influence in Congress. His attempt to divert public concern from the slavery issue to foreign policy by working toward increased American influence in Central and South America was doomed to failure, although Buchanan's personal achievements in establishing American rights there were considerable. He opened the door to commercial and diplomatic relations with the Orient, particularly with Japan and China, but again was forced to curtail his efforts because of congressional resistance. Even his



Courtesy R. B. Cunningham

Buchanan's cabin birthplace, now at Mercersburg Academy, Mercersburg.

own Democratic party was seriously divided over the slavery issue and could not be depended upon to support administration measures.

The 1860 presidential election saw the disintegration of the Democratic party, and, with it, the end of national parties. The election of Abraham Lincoln on a strictly sectional Republican platform signified disaster in the eyes of Southerners, and secession proceedings were begun. Buchanan, with no basis now for power, was placed in the untenable position of mediating between rabid free-staters and secessionists. From the time of Lincoln's election in Novem-

ber, 1860, to his inauguration in March, 1861, Buchanan's attempts to placate both sides were met with violent denunciations from both camps. His suggestion of a constitutional convention to redefine the place of slavery in the United States found little support. His policy thus became to commit no act which might lead to active warfare, while carrying out the business of the federal government in the seceded states. It was an exhausting task for the seventy-year-old veteran, and one that he gladly relinquished on Inauguration Day, 1861.

His return to Wheatland was the occasion for large celebrations at each train stop; and the policy which the new Republican regime initiated seemed to be nothing if not a continuation of his. Yet when actual firing began, and the Civil War was a fact, it was Buchanan who became the scapegoat. Misrepresentations of facts were frequent, and any effort at defense on Buchanan's part only led to further vilification. He spent much of his time writing a book, published in 1866, entitled *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of Rebellion*, in which he defended his actions for future generations.

Life at Wheatland continued to bring pleasure, although lessened by the news of war. During the Battle of Gettysburg, he refused to leave, although Confederate advance guards were about ten miles distant. Letters from Southern friends attested to the physical and spiritual damage the war had caused. As complex new forces appeared throughout the country, Buchanan began to feel he had outlived his time, and indeed, at seventy-eight, he was the only surviving member of the House of Representatives he had joined in 1821. In May, 1868, he became ill with a cold, and complications of old age set in. Knowing that he had not long to live, he directed that his funeral be kept small. After his death on June 1, 1868, however, his neighbors could not be kept away, and the funeral attracted nearly 20,000 persons. The life of public service to which Buchanan was dedicated had earned the appreciation of many who were determined to pay this final tribute to him.